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ABSTRACT

A literature review examined the roles of institutions of higher education as they relate to access, response to expectations, and adaptation to the uniqueness of the adult learner. It was hypothesized that adult students have needs differing from those of traditional college students. Other hypotheses were that barriers exist that discourage matriculation of adults and higher education can better serve adults by refocusing and modifying its structures. The literature review indicated that adults do differ from the traditional students in age, motivation for attending college, style of learning, family responsibilities, experiential background, and shifting personal circumstances. The literature substantiated that adults face situational and dispositional barriers and that higher education imposes institutional barriers--all of which frustrate and discourage adults from enrolling. The literature indicated that higher education can enhance adult access by identifying and defining its role in regard to the clientele and by restructuring and redesigning administrative, curricular, and service functions. All hypotheses were accepted. Institutions of higher education were recommended to provide increased and more flexible support services, establish inservice for faculty and administrators, adjust class schedules and locations, and provide creative options for financial aid. (YLB)

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The Gap Between Needs and Services for Adult Students in Higher Education

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The Gap Between Needs and Services for Adult Students in Higher Education

Introduction

Adults are participating in educational endeavors in ever increasing numbers. Changing career patterns, leisure-time expectations, spiralling technological obsolescence, and the rising consciousness regarding the quality of life have triggered adults to seek educational programs as part of career development, personal enrichment, and as a medium of life-transition (Kasworm, 1980).

Cross (1980) cites that of the forty million adults experiencing career and job transition, sixty percent are availing themselves of educational opportunities. Burnham (1982) notes that adults have discovered that they can be multi-participatory rather than restricted in their life's activities. Adults are motivated by the prospect of being employed in six or eight different jobs during their lifetime and by the desire for lifelong learning and added enrichment to their lives.

Coupled with the motivational aspect of seeking educational opportunities are the demographic data which indicate that by the late 1970's, sixty million adults, age twenty-five and over, were enrolled in school; that the average college age was shifting upwards; and that by the year 2000 , the dominant age group could expected to be thirty to forty-four years old. Adults are participating in learning experiences that range from those planned by professionals, to those planned by the learners themselves, to those associated

with educational institutions (Burnham, 1982).

Adults comprise the fastest growing segment of students in institutions of higher education, 48% (Kasworm, 1980). Weathersby and Tarule (1980) report that these new students are women, minorities, older versions of traditional-age students, professionals seeking upgrading, and those who lost out in a previous chance at college because of lesser opportunity or ability. They are more diverse in goals, skills, previous experience, intellectual capacities, and styles than those individuals with whom most institutions of higher education are accustomed to working.

The influx of the adult learner raises the question as to whether or not institutions are aware of the needs of the adult population seeking higher education opportunities and whether or not the programs and services as presently designed and delivered are appropriate to the clientele. This issue of the needs of the clientele in relation to services provided by higher education will be the basis of this research.

Summary Statement of the Problem

The population under study are the adult learners who are enrolling in institutions of higher education. The questions under consideration in this research are: (1) Are there differences between the adult student and the traditional college student in regards to background, needs, and expectations: (2) Are there personal and institutional barriers that prevent adults from enrolling in institutions of higher education? (3) How can institutions of higher education better provide for the adult learner?

Specific Problem Area

This research will examine the roles of institutions of higher education as they relate to the adult learner relative to access, response to expectations, and adaptation to the uniqueness of the clientele.

Definition of Terms

Adult - A person over the traditional age of college students (22 years +) who performs socially productive roles and who has assumed primary responsibility for his/her own life.

Adult education - A process whereby persons whose major social roles are characteristic of adult status undertake learning activities for the purposes of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values, skills.

Higher Education - Those institutions offering baccalaureate degrees and beyond.

Lifelong Learning - An overall process aimed at both restructuring the existing educational system and designed to meet the expectations of men and women who act as agents of their own education (UNESCO).

Traditional college student - The 18-22 year old person whose main activity is the pursuit of a degree and who has not assumed primary responsibility for his/her life.

Hypothesis

Hypothesis No. 1 - Adult students have needs that differ from those of

traditional college students.

Hypothesis No. 2 - Barriers exist in the lives of adults and within institutions of higher education which discourage matriculation of adults.

Hypothesis No. 3 - Higher education can better serve adults and meet their special circumstances by committing itself to a refocus and a modification of its structures.

Assumptions

It is assumed that while the adult population is more diverse than it is alike, adults are not appreciably different in their perspectives, reasons and expectations for enrolling in institutions of higher education. It is also assumed that higher education is committed to serving the adult learner.

Limitations

This investigation is limited to information obtained from a review of literature in the field of adult and higher education. Two year colleges have been omitted because of their early commitment to serving adults.

Significance of the Problem

Given the demographics which indicate that the median age of the United States is rising and given the fact that adults are returning to school to better their lives personally, professionally, and economically, institutions

of higher education must address their readiness to accept these learners and to respond to this extremely diverse group of students. Higher education will no longer be able to rely on the enrollment of traditional students as a majority of its clientele and income. A dichotomy exists between the need for lifelong education and the lack of responsiveness by higher education. Institutions must come to grips with responding to the needs of the adult or face competition by other agencies which will more adequately meet their needs (Murphy, 1982). Moreover, the potential of our nation's resources will not be developed.

Review of Related Literature

The adult learner has become the subject of a growing body of literature. This increasing amount of research is an indication of the emergence of the adult as a constitutent seeking a diversified educational program. Furthermore the literature discusses their needs in relation to their younger counterparts, the barriers that exist to their pursuit of education, and suggests modifications to the present structures that will assist them in entering the educational scene.

Adults enrolling in educational programs are different from the traditional students. They are twenty-five to forty-five years old, are rearing families, changing jobs, and seeking enrichment to their lives. Their motivations for attending college range from seeking skill development and movement in career, to enhancing the quality of their lives. As adults enter the educational scene, they are experiencing shifting personal relationships and a restructuring of family life (Galliano, 1982), and an anxiety over financial

concerns and fear of failure (Sadler, 1982).

Knowles (1969) pinpoints features of adults that differentiate them from younger learners. Adults are self-directed learners and human beings, learn best through methods and techniques which build upon an accumulated reservoir of experience, are problem-centered learners, and confront learning within the context of their social roles.

Cross (1982) writes that adults, as opposed to younger learners, face situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers to learning. Situational barriers are those arising out of one's situation in life at a given time such as lack of time due to career and home responsibilities, lack of financial resources, and lack of transportation and child care options. Institutional barriers are those imposed by institutions of higher education which discourage adults from participating in educational activities. Examples include inconvenient class schedules or locations, full-time fees for part-time students, inappropriate courses of study, lack of information about programs, and overabundance of "red tape." Dispositional barriers are those related to attitudes and self-perceptions that adults have about themselves as learners. Lack of self-confidence and the opinion that one is too old to learn are such barriers.

Miller (1981) indicated that access to higher education for adults is impeded if location of program and time structure excludes adults; if the concern of many adults regarding previous negative experience or anxiety about readiness for college goes unrecognized by higher education; if support services and personnel trained to deal with special problems of adults are not available; if the financial support for adult learning opportunities is lacking; if the institution promises what it can not deliver; if the organizational structure and internal support of the institution are not complementary to adults; and

if the quality of academic programs and administrative support is second rate.

More to the point, Murphy (1982) wrote that "many colleges are still unwilling or unable to accommodate the important needs of mature people. Admissions standards may not be appropriate, specialized counseling is not always available, there are usually no child care services, financial aid for part-timers may be inadequate or non-existent, curricular content and instructional methods are often inappropriate, and professors can be unprepared for or even hostile to teachings adults." (p.172)

If higher education desires to best serve the adult, it must modify the existing structures that place the traditional student ahead of the adult. Institutional issues must be addressed. Higher education must identify and define its role in adult education, organize to best perform this role, design curriculum and methodology, and obtain a quality program based on standards which are different from the regular college age program, and structure a mechanism that will involve adults in planning programs that affect them (Knowles, 1969).

Weathersby and Tarule (1980) recommended that higher education respond to the diverse group by gaining knowledge of adult development and humanizing the institution and by identifying the group to be served, assessing the learning needs and goals, designing educational goals that reflect a commitment to individual development, and establishing delivery systems that match goals.

Sadler (1982) suggested that adult learners can best be served by institutions which recognize the need for different services for adults as opposed to those needed by traditional students. To do this, institutions must focus on a commitment to meet the needs of new and returning older students and must consider (1) whether the adult learner requires more or different support services, and (2) how students can be integrated into campus structure.

Rawlins and Davis (1981) reported results of a study conducted at Eastern Illinois University in 1978-79. The following recommendations were generated to encourage enrollment by adult students:

1. Develop a daytime orientation program.
2. Provide more undergraduate classes, especially those with single sections between 9:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.
3. Develop a "guide for returnees" brochure geared to the uniqueness of adults.
4. Develop a "comback club" to provide opportunities for adults to meet with their peers.
5. Provide housing for commuters when driving conditions became hazardous.
6. Provide faculty development to increase the awareness of the unique needs of these students and to foster expertise for working with them.

Additional thrusts must be aimed at more personalized effort in counseling, at integrating the student into curriculum development, and in fostering a climate whereby the adult is able to choose his/her own direction for learning and assume responsibility for his/her choices (Watson, 1980) and at developing admissions policies that reflect the experiential background in which adults find themselves.

Discussion

A review of literature indicates that adult enrollment in educational programs is increasing at rapid rates and that a large percentage of adults

are seeking educational opportunities at institutions of higher education. Research substantiates the fact that adult learners are different from the traditional student in aspects of experience, role-perception, and place in life. Relative to these differences is the question of the feasibility and capability of higher education to accept these students based on present organizational structure, philosophical base, and mission. Literature indicates that barriers persist in both the lives of adults and in the academic community which prevent easy access to higher education. While under scrutiny, these barriers still remain as hindrances even in the midst of recommendations and research that offers alternative approaches to higher education. The momentum of higher education to adapt and change to meet the needs of the projected clientele is at a slower pace than the desires of adult students to enter.

Malcolm Knowles (1969) writes that "The new world requires a new purpose for education - the development of a capacity in each individual to learn, to change, to create a new culture throughout his life span...Flowing from this concept is the wider acceptance of continuing education as a necessary component in a total educational design and not merely as an afterthought when the needs of the young have been served." (p.23,24) This philosophy sets the tone and creates the challenge for higher education to provide high quality programs and to restructure the system as necessary to meet the needs of a changing population.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Hypothesis No. 1

Adult students have needs that differ from those of traditional college

students. The review of related literature indicates that adults do differ from the traditional student not only in age, but also in motivation for attending college, style of learning, family responsibilities, experiential background, and shifting personal circumstances. The hypothesis was accepted.

Hypothesis No. 2

Barriers exist in the lives of adults and within institutions of higher education that discourage matriculation. Literature substantiates that adults face situational and dispositional barriers and that higher education imposes institutional barriers all of which frustrates and discourages adults from enrolling. The hypothesis was accepted.

Hypothesis No. 3

Higher education can better serve adults and meet their special circumstances by committing itself to a refocus and a modification of its structure. Literature indicates that higher education can enhance access for the adult by (1) identifying and defining its role in regards to the clientele and (2) restructuring and redesigning administrative, curricular and service functions in light of the institutional role. This hypothesis was accepted.

Recommendations

A gap exists between the needs of the adult learner and the abilities of higher education to provide for them. The forward-looking institution will not only maintain programs for the existing traditional student, but will also have in place a clear perspective of its corresponding role as an institution serving adults. If institutions of higher education are committed to the adult learner, increased and more flexible support services must be provided, inservice for faculty and administrators must be established, class schedules and locations must be adjusted, and creative options for financial

aid and child care must be explored.

Based on the findings, institutions of higher education may wish to examine options that are presently in place at institutions presently serving non-traditional students. The two-year schools have an edge on meeting the needs of the clientele, and higher education could be the beneficiary of these alternative approaches.

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